

Dead Man Walking

This is a movie worth seeing.

Apparently 'based' on a true story, this well crafted Tim Robbins film dramatizes the events surrounding Sister Helen Prejean and her relationship to the unfolding execution of Matthew Poncelet. Poncelet, played by Sean Penn faces the last few days of his life on death row as a tattooed murder convict. Helen is drawn impishly into the circle of events as Poncelet's spiritual companion and is consequently torn between her fixation on Poncelet and the passion of his victims' families.

The grainy treatment at the opening of the film in the movie footage and soundtrack are powerfully arranged to present the tone, the place, the aura of the rest of the film. The atmosphere and homes of the characters are intelligently palpable.

As Susan 'Bull Durham' Sarandon's role sympathetically seesaws between concerned parties one begins to appreciate her spectacular performance (and unwavering accent). Robert 'The Natural' Prosky also delivers a short, tight performance as Poncelet's attorney. The supporting performances are flawed, however, by bad accents and overscripting. The not-quite-so- heartwrenching narrative of the Percys highlighted one weakness of the movie: the couple, seated on the couch, describing the brutality of their daughter's rape and murder are made to speak in complete sentences with all the fervent acting of a bland infomercial endorsement.

Halfway through the film, I couldn't help but recall the powerful Errol Morris documentary, *The Thin Blue Line* (Philip Glass soundtrack complete with film's entire dialogue is available on Elektra/ Nonesuch Records). Sister Helen and Poncelet agree the truth will set you free and this holds true in the comparison of *Dead Man Walking* and *The Thin Blue Line* and ultimately begs the question: Why did Robbins feel compelled to dramatize these events? Morris presents an incredibly powerful drama: real people, real accents and quotidian props with all the subtle power of a dull lethal syringe. Where Robbins' film comes off two-dimensional at best, Morris's film is a minimalistic multidimensional artifact sparsely inciting banality, disgust melancholy, contemplation.

Halfway through *Dead Man Walking*, I was bored. But as Robbins proceeds to answer the begging question the story unfolds beautifully into an intelligently balanced (if not politically tinged) drama highlighted by montages of Delacroix's and Poncelet's brutal acts of rape and murder. No doubt the film is well crafted and well balanced. It makes you think. But inevitably docudramas present this one obvious liability: they invariably leave some doubt in the viewers' minds as to the nature of the dramatization. Exactly what element in the narrative required dramatizing (perhaps it was Sarandon's sans-habit pseudo-orgasmic intimacy with Penn, but one can only guess).

I had a conversation a few days later with a friend who saw *Dead Man Walking*, too. In discussing the film's closing scene as Poncelet apologizes for the crimes he has committed, the two of us inquired in unison, 'I wonder what he really said.' Too bad Errol Morris wasn't there to document it.

Text by Patrick Bell